

America Has a Silent Black Majority



They fear crime more than police and know rioters are opportunists, not revolutionaries.

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It's too early to know what will come of the violent protests in response to the death of George Floyd. But we do know that recent history has not been especially kind to militant efforts to advance racial equality.



The methods championed most famously by Martin Luther King Jr. culminated with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, two of the most consequential laws in U.S. history. By contrast, the Black Power movement that followed eventually imploded, and its most prominent leaders wound up exiled,

imprisoned or victims of murderous rivalries. Whatever white sympathy the civil-rights movement had gained was quickly depleted in the aftermath of rioting in Detroit, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and other major cities.

Moreover, the heightened group identity associated with black militants, as with the Black Lives Matter movement today, was followed by a white backlash in the 1970s and '80s, which saw the rise of the skinhead and white-power movements in the U.S.

You don't need to read an academic paper to understand that peaceful civil-rights demonstrations have had more success than violent protests, but a Princeton scholar just published one that is well worth your time. Writing last month in the *American Political Science Review*, Omar Wasow, a professor of politics, described the results of a 15-year [research project](#) on the political consequences of protests.

Mr. Wasow, who is black, focused on black-led demonstrations between 1960 and 1972, and he found that the "types of protest tactics employed" can make all the difference in advancing a social cause. "Nonviolent black-led protests played a critical role in tilting the national political agenda toward civil rights," he concluded, while "black-led resistance that included protester-initiated violence contributed to outcomes directly in opposition to the policy preferences of the protesters."

In the aftermath of the unrest caused by Floyd's death in police custody, President Trump has made it clear that "law and order" will be a campaign theme, and Mr. Wasow's research offers some clues as to whether it could be an effective strategy. In a recent [interview](#) with the New Yorker magazine, Mr. Wasow said he found a "causal relationship between violent protests" that occurred after the April 1968 assassination of Dr. King "and the shift away from the Democratic coalition." More specifically, "if your county was proximate to violent protests, then that county voted 6 to 8 percentage points more toward Nixon in November."

The analogy between 1968 and 2020 is complicated by any number of factors. The presidential election of 1968 was a three-man contest, and Nixon was considered the safe choice for people who wanted law and order restored by someone tougher than Hubert Humphrey but without George Wallace's racial demagoguery. In addition, Nixon wasn't the incumbent. He was running to address crime, urban unrest and racial divisions that had worsened on someone else's watch. Mr. Trump's declining approval suggests that he won't be able to make that argument. The Journal [reported](#) last week, based on its latest polling with NBC News, that 80% of voters currently "feel that the country is spiraling out of control."

The question is whether Joe Biden and the Democrats will rescue Mr. Trump by allowing violent protesters to become the face of their party and by indulging the increasingly absurd demands of radical progressives. Mr. Trump may be unpopular, but so are looting, toppling statues, defunding the police, and allowing armed radicals to take over sections of major cities.

Nor should the political left assume that the black voters they need to turn out in large numbers five months from now will thrill to this agenda. In a 1970 memo to President Nixon, adviser Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote that there "is a silent black majority as well as a white one" and that "it shares most of the concerns of its white counterpart."

That was true 50 years ago and remains true today. Most black people know that George Floyd is no more representative of blacks than Derek Chauvin is of police officers. They know that the frequency of black encounters with law enforcement has far more to do with black crime rates than with racially biased policing. They know that young black men have far more to fear from their peers than from the cops. And they know that the rioters are opportunists, not revolutionaries.

There's nothing wrong with having a national conversation about better policing, but this one has turned into a conversation about blaming law enforcement for social inequality, which is not only illogical but dangerous. Unsafe neighborhoods retard upward mobility, and poorly policed neighborhoods are less safe. A conversation that doesn't acknowledge that reality is hardly worth having.

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